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THE PENSIONER.

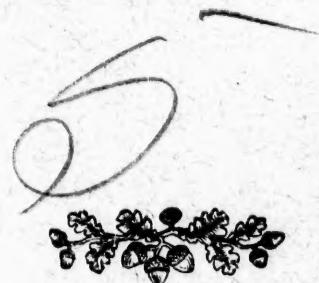
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A Poem.

BY

ALEXANDER CHARLES STEWART.

“ The broken soldier, kindly bade to stay,
Sat by his fire and talked the night away ;
Wept o'er his wounds or tales of sorrow done,
Shouldered his crutch and showed how fields were won.”

—GOLDSMITH.



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To
ANDREW McMILLAN, Esq.,
A MAN
FROM WHOSE NOBILITY OF SOUL
THE WORLD HAS FAILED TO DETRACT,
I DEDICATE THIS POEM.

Allow me, my dear Sir, to offer a few words upon this
united work which you have honored by your admiration and
friendly comment, both of which were accorded with such mod-
eration as neither to kindle vanity on the one hand, nor ex-
tinguish hopefulness upon the other. Now that the poem is
about to be sent to press, I find those apprehensions which
I kept under the opiate of friendly criticism awakened painfully
by the knowledge that very soon public judgment shall be pro-
nounced upon it, and though I have but little doubt with re-
gard to those whose opinion I cherish most, I have been tempt-
ed to entertain a thought of sparing this friend, which has
lighted me through the dark period of many months, from the
severe buffettings of careless critics and pedagogic snarlers. But
as you and others have desired, with myself, the publication, it
shall accordingly be done. I had thought to offer some notes
on various parts of this poem, but finding that such were likely
to crowd up too rapidly, I changed the intention, and I think
wisely; besides, I was determined not to increase the issue be-
yond its present size: therefore I will not allow myself too much
scope, even in this limited address, but one thing more I must
say, and it is this—that I hope, with all the ardor of my soul,
that never, never may such a record be true, written of Can-

ada and her defenders. We may lack enthusiasm, but let not be in this respect. I have no desire to flatter the "pop and circumstance of glorious war," but when a country receives from her sons such an instance of unshrinking obedience, unparalleled valor, and determined unselfishness, in the face of Havoc himself, she should cherish their honor, as they defend her name.

I have the honor to be,

My dear Sir,

Your very humble servant

A. C. STEWART

East Toronto,

Dec. 17th, 1890.

THE PENSIONER.

'TWAS eve ! the sky was dull and grey ;
The light was sinking fast away ;
The birds had ceas'd their evening call ;
The cattle long had sought the stall ;
The watch-dog rous'd and shook his chain,
Look'd out, then sought his straw again.
Beneath a tree upon the hill,
The sheep were huddled from the chill.
And gazing round with timid eyes,
Fill'd the bleak air with mournful cries,
The steed from instinct turn'd his tail
To meet the swiftly-rising gale,
And, with his mane about his eyes,
Look'd leeward at the dark'ning skies.
Before the swift and moaning blast,
The heavy clouds were sweeping past ;
The foliage wore the air of night,
And indistinct became the sight.
At intervals, with baleful eye,
The lurid lightning lit the sky ;
The thunderbolt crash'd booming on—
The day at length was fairly gone.
Quick, thick, and fast, the heavy rain
Was dash'd against the window-pane
From which a timid, bashful ray,
Pour'd through the gloom a path of grey,
And, struggling, bent its feeble might
To further pierce the thick'ning night.
With darkness heavier grew the rain,
And longer link'd th' electric chain ;
The thunder shook the trembling earth,
And hurried on the tempest's birth—
With breaking crash each deafening peal
Was hurl'd upon the lightning's heel,

And bursting through the riven cloud,
 The echoes rumbled long and loud !
 The river now began to roar,
 And rear its crest above the shore,
 While o'er the rocks which would delay,
 Growling, it sped its sullen way.

The farmer snug renewed the fire,
 And turned the wick a trifle higher ;
 And, as the tempest roaring sped,
 Soliloquized and shook his head :
 " God knows who's on the road to-night !
 Full many a storm myself hath seen,
 But since I did with Kate unite,
 As fierce a blast there hath not been.
 Come nearer, wife : ah, how it blows !
 Happy the man who has a home,
 Tho' tempests war, he may repose—
 Far otherwise with those who roam."

To list the gale the farmer sat—
 Upon the hearth soft purred the cat ;
 Without, the thunder boomed its pride,
 While surging swept the lashing tide ;
 The tempest blew with steady breath ;
 The raindrops smote the earth beneath,
 But by the hearth where comfort reign'd,
 The farmer soon in sleep was chain'd.
 But hark ! the door resounds a knock—
 The sleeper woke and turned the lock,
 And dripping, cold, wet to the skin,
 An agèd wanderer staggered in.
 They sat him close beside the flame—
 His garments damp they wrung,
 While in the woman's eye there came
 A tear which glistening clung !
 And then this tribute of the soul
 Adown her cheek did softly roll :
 Her sympathies awakened, then
 Recalled a silenced voice again ;
 And, bursting through the mist of years,

Warm memory came with soothing tears.
The stranger's locks were such as woke
A thrill as if her father spoke !

The man was old, but straight his form ;
Tho' thin his cheek, his eye was warm.
The firm-set lip betrayed a soul
Accustomed long to self-control ;
His locks of gray were interlined
With darker threads of passion's kind,
And hung above a brow which wore
The impress deep of sorrows sore,
Yet fair withal, though many a clime
Had lent its aid to blanching time,

All this his host perceived, and more,
He saw the man was old and poor,
And wondering how it came that one
Whose every movement, look and tone,
Bespoke a still unconquer'd mind,
And strength of will which nought could bind,
Was forced on such a night to roam
Without a shelter or a home,
At length, with an uncertain pause,
He ventured for to ask the cause.
The stranger heaved a stifled sigh,
While something dimm'd his restless eye ;
Through his damp locks his fingers ran,
And thus evasive he began :

" Full many a storm in many a clime
I've stood unmoved in vanish'd time,
But now my limbs are old,
My frame is racked with foreign toils,
And slumber damp on distant soils,
And pervious to the cold.
But these were nought if I had known
A thankful glance when all was done,
Or even a slave's reward.
For when his daily toil is o'er,
He may, till morning, sleep secure

Nor future ills regard.
 But I must sleep 'neath heaven's dome
 With hunger and without a home."

He ceas'd, and o'er his thoughtful brow
 A darker shadow pass'd,
 He watched the bright flames come and go,
 Obedient to the blast.
 He seem'd as one whose mind was drawn
 To gaze on visions past and gone.

A silence reign'd within the room—
 At last the hostess spoke,
 And ask'd the stranger to resume
 The tale so sudden broke,
 And being plied with questions, he
 Told at some length his history :

I was a happy ploughboy once,
 And whistled to the lark's response,
 And wish'd not for a happier day
 Than following up the furrow'd way.
 I had a soul untainted then,
 Which sympathized with man and men.
 No canker on my heart had fed,
 Nor love betray'd, nor passion led,
 Those were the times when blithe and gay
 I watch'd the sun burst into day,
 And, smiling, couch upon the hill,
 To drink of perfumed dew his fill.
 I knew no world but that bright spot—
 My gray-haired father's humble cot,
 My gentle mother's smiling brow ;
 I broke her heart—she's sleeping now !
 I know I was her chiefest joy,
 Although shē never told me so,
 For I have seen her loving eye
 Smile on me till the tears would flow.
 But those were not the burning tears
 She wept when I grew ripe in years.
 My brothers and my sisters dear

Composed the fond, familiar sphere,
 Where love lights up each kindred eye,
 Cools pain's hot brow and soothes the sigh.
 If fate had only spared me one
 To speak of home ! but all are gone—
 With social joy their lives were blest ;
 They sleep united and at rest.
 Upon the hill where morn appeared,
 My Mary's cottage walls were reared ;
 Upon its gables, roof and eaves,
 Drooped, clung and bloomed the ivy leaves,
 When waned the sunlight in the west,

A thousand times my feet have stray'd,
 Compulsive to my throbbing breast,
 That beat for one belovèd maid,
 To where her voice, like silver bells,
 Rung through her casement's antique swells.

The church stood half-way up the hill ;
 Beneath it lay the rumbling mill,
 And further down the vale, the stream
 Still murmured in its restless dream.
 I see its waters glancing yet,
 I hear its liquid murmurs fret,
 I see it fading in the pond,
 And spread its circles far beyond,
 Where on its broad and glittering breast,
 The ducks and geese repose at rest.
 Upon its shore the willows sleep,
 And there the fir-trees climb the steep ;
 And still the waste-gate's mournful flow,
 Swells on the same—forever so,—
 A scene, a picture, and a spot,
 Which once beheld is ne'er forgot.

Dearest of dear and happy vales,
 Where peace and plenty furl'd their sails !
 Where Innocence and Beauty met,
 Nor knew at parting that regret
 Which passion wrings the heart withal,
 When he has found us in his thrall

No sick'ning throb nor tumbling pulse,
 When blood, and heart, and brain convulse ;
 But the soft clasp, and quiet sigh,
 And tender tone, and drooping eye.
 I've seen the sunrise often-time,
 In many a distant, boasted clime ;
 I've seen him flash his colors where
 A snow-flake never chilled the air ;
 I've watched him in the northern zone,
 Where day and night were all his own ;
 It may be fancy, but it seems
 At home he spread his brightest beams ;
 The moon there shone forever bright,
 No deadly vapor marr'd her light ;
 The silver mist which wrapped the stream,
 At eve was sweet as fancy's dream.
 The plain which spread towards the west,
 With grass the greenest summer blest ;
 And to the north the forest stood
 Up to the sky in giant mood.

Oh, childhood's home ! the nest of youth,
 Peace, Beauty, Innocence and Truth !
 There is no spot beneath the skies
 That with thy hallow'd memory vies !
 Thy perfumed breezes wa'ted love,
 Such as the angels might approve.
 And oh ! what joy and bliss divine,
 While o'er her shimmering starlit line,
 The moon roll'd on her silent way,
 And I, with Mary dear, did stray,
 And list the plaintive nightingale
 Call to her mate within the vale.
 What were the visions dreamed of there ?
 Alas ! as false as they were fair,
 And living only in the brain,
 To glow, then darken into pain.
 Too beautiful to sleep so soon,—
 (She died in you'h's and beauty's noon.)
 And yet 'twere better thus to die,
 Ere Age had dull'd her sparkling eye,

Or chill'd the blush upon her cheek,
 Or bid her forehead's smoothness break.
 Her eye surpassed all, all compare,
 And dark it was, and dark her hair ;
 Her mouth was like the timid rose,
 In doubt, its beauty to disclose :
 But wherefore linger on her charms,—
 Her baby sleeps within her arms ;
 In death, as life, they still entwine,—
 I loved them both,—although not mine.

I was my father's eldest born,
 The offspring of his wayward love,
 Which, in its fluctuating morn,
 O'er fancy's fields was wont to rove ;
 And those deliriums, strong and wild,
 Unknowing, he bequeathed his child ;
 And thus it was, that tho' I loved
 My Mary as I loved my soul,
 For freedom ta'en I stood reproved,
 While striving still for self-control.
 Yet no excuse I framed, or frame,
 To gild my sin or shield my name.

They say there is a thing call'd fate,
 Which triumphs o'er our mortal will,
 Nor leaves us power to arbitrate
 Betwixt the paths of good and ill ;
 And though in youth I battled long,
 And owned no master but my mind,
 I found the brain's self-basis wrong,
 And fate at length stood out defined.
 For, where my hopes were strongest laid,
 I trusted to a thing decayed,

In books I lived, but found at last
 The fallacy of learning's tome—
 It soothes our souls for perils past,
 But teaches nought for things to come !
 And there fate reasserts her power—
 No mortal can discard his dower ;

And, musing thus, I learned to stray
 Alone beside the babbling stream,
 Where Luna's soft and silver ray.
 Link'd heaven and earth as in a dream :
 For nature never lost a charm
 For me, although my heart rebell'd
 Against the desolating arm
 Which to her clay my spirit held.
 I may not picture all I bore—
 My life was one incessant war,
 And so I left my native shore
 For fresher realms and scenes afar.
 An inconsistent lot was mine—
 A soldier in the British line !

The Russian hordes were then in arms,
 And southward swept their bearded swarms ;
 And to the Euxine's desert coast,
 Old Albion shipped her valiant host ;
 And France, too, sent her heroes bold,
 The fierce aggressors back to hold.
 It was September, fifty-four,
 When Alma's heights were dearly won,
 And scarce a month had pass'd, before
 The Balaclava deed was done !
 Myself made one in that wild fray—
 A braver squadron never charged
 Across the plain, away ! away !
 And soon our crests in smoke submerged.
 As circling cannons' lightning breath
 Burst belching forth the iron death —
 Six hundred odd, with Cardigan
 To lead them as they forward leapt,
 Dragoons and Lancers in the van,
 As even as link'd man to man—
 Like Britain's sons bold, onward swept !
 The Russian cannon ploughed the ranks—
 The gaps were fill'd as soon as made—
 Still forward on the battered banks
 The Troopers swept as on parade !
 Onward, without a swerve or stop,

For fear they never knew ;
 And when we reached the battery's top
 Forth burst the wild halloo !
 Each flashing sabre swift descends,
 And each a Russian gunner ends !
 And forth the life-blood gushed !
 And, weltering in the reeking gore,
 They woke the cannon's voice no more—
 Its brazen lips were hush'd,
 And where late boomed its deafening sound,
 A moment silence fell profound !

The smoke-cloud slowly rolled away !
 A mile to rear the Royals lay—
 To right about, and then
 The steeds were turn'd—we gave them rein,
 And backward swept across the plain,
 Towards old Britain's men :
 When in the way we must pursue,
 The Russian cavalry were threw,
 To cut off our retreat !
 The steed was spurred, the sword was drawn,
 And like a wave we rolled upon
 The Cossacque lines complete !
 Then hand to hand the sabres swung,
 On plates of steel they biting wrung ;
 To earth were horse and horseman flung,
 And the wild war-steeds neigh'd !
 Spurning with fiery hoof the plains,
 They biting tore each others manes,
 And burst the temper'd bridle-chains,
 As if of ribbons made.
 The soldier, from his saddle thrown,
 By struggling steeds was trampled down,
 And bloods of different creed and birth
 Were mingled on the reeking earth ;
 And such the frenzy of the strife,
 We neither spared nor cared for life !

We had an opening almost made,
 When, cowards ! in our rear

The Russians hurl'd their cannonade
 On us, wild-mingling there !
 They reck'd not of their kindred then,
 For friends and foes were slain ;
 And of our brave six hundred men,
 But few came back again—
 A broken remnant carried back
 The glory of that wild attack !
 Five hundred died as die the brave !
 Five hundred found a foreign grave !
 Five hundred on the rolls of Fame
 Inscribed themselves a glorious name !

Perhaps I dwell on this too long,
 But, quick and fierce, my fancies throng—
 Convulsive, passionate and strong.
 The blood streams boiling to my brain—
 I seem to grasp the charger's rein,
 Unsheathe my glittering sword again,
 And hear the cannon roar !
 I've suffered much, perhaps but still
 I'd bear a greater load of ill

To charge the slaves once more,
 And pay the cringing cowards for
 Their precedent to barbarous war.
 But it made demons of them, when
 A handful of old England's men
 Drew, eye to eye with death, their swords,
 And charged and slew the bulwark'd hordes
 Of Russia, on their chosen ground,
 With guns and gunners wall'd around !
 What though it was a wrong command
 That forward hurl'd our gallant band !
 It showed what Albion's soldiers were,
 True to themselves, and true to her,
 And to the flag that never fell
 While there still lived a single hand
 To rear its folds, and let it swell—
 The emblem of his native land !
 It makes my bosom heave with pride,
 To think how Scotland's heroes died—

Their tunics drench'd with hostile blood,
 Dripped o'er their hearts still unsubdued !
 And England's sons, in brave career,
 Sank from the saddle with a cheer—
 The last, and then to warlike rest,
 Fell on their Scottish brethren's breast !
 While Erin's son, his dying blow
 Hurl'd on the nearest Russian foe —
 Reel'd,—and in death's embraces lay,
 His glazing eyes still on the fray.
 So fought, so died and vanquished, they
 Who charged on that eternal day.

He paused ! his eye with fire shone,
 His chin was set, his lips were drawn ;
 The veins upon his forehead stood
 Out well defined by rushing blood.
 His knotted hand was clenched like steel
 Upon the sword he seemed to feel,
 And his heaved breast bespoke the storm
 Which animated thus his form.
 His passion pass'd, and, cooler grown,
 His voice resumed a sadder tone ;
 And this is all I earn'd, he said,
 The liberty to beg my bread,
 And it may be, perhaps, a name
 Which will not clothe a shivering frame,
 Nor shield me from a beggar's shame,
 Nor give me back the supple days
 Of strength in England's service spent ;
 Nor bar me where the pauper lays
 His bones. Perhaps I were content
 To perish thus, but still it stings
 My heart that my proud father's son
 Should lie where Vice detested brings
 Her victims when her work is done.
 Would I had died upon the field
 Where comrades would have gathered round,
 And on the shell-torn battle ground
 Paid tribute with the muskets' sound
 To those who died but did not yield !

The old man's eyes were full of tears,
His frame relaxed, his strength was gone,
His shoulders piled with weighty years,
His life unequal, nearly done—
Vicissitudes had crush'd a mind
Which Death alone could tame or bind !

I leave him here, and veil the rest,
Nor further picture England's shame,
Perhaps at Gratitude's request
I may reveal this hero's name.
Such is the tale ! such the reward
That England gives her dauntless guard !

